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EDUCATION 12/30/2013 @ 10:03AM | 51,621 views

The Eight Characteristics Of Effective School Leaders

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Trying to pin down what makes an effective school leader can be a little like trying to eat soup with a fork, but a group of academics has come up with what looks like a pretty good list.

I [reported](#) earlier this month on a [study](#) by experts at the Institute of [Education](#) (IoE) in London into the turnaround of schools in one of the city's poorest boroughs, from the worst performing in England to among the best in the world.



*Institute of Education, taken by C Ford March 04.
Category: Institute of Education (Photo credit:
Wikipedia)*

Not surprisingly, the researchers identified the quality of [leadership](#) as one of the key factors driving the transformation, in line with many previous studies into school improvement, such as Kenneth Leithwood and Karen Seashore-Louis' influential 2011 [Linking Leadership to Student Learning](#).

But the IoE academics – professors David Woods and Chris Husbands and Dr Chris Brown – went further. Through a study of reports by school inspectors, they came up with a set of characteristics shared by successful school leaders that I thought was worth sharing.

1. They have consistent, high expectations and are very ambitious for the success of their pupils.
2. They constantly demonstrate that disadvantage need not be a barrier to achievement.
3. They focus relentlessly on improving teaching and learning with very effective professional development of all staff.
4. They are expert at assessment and the tracking of pupil progress with appropriate support and intervention based upon a detailed knowledge of individual pupils.
5. They are highly inclusive, having complete regard for the progress and personal development of every pupil.
6. They develop individual students through promoting rich opportunities for learning both within and out of the classroom.
7. They cultivate a range of partnerships particularly with parents, business and

the community to support pupil learning and progress.

8. They are robust and rigorous in terms of self-evaluation and data analysis with clear strategies for improvement.

Although this list was drawn up with particular reference to schools in difficult circumstances, they appear to readily translate into different contexts. What is particularly heartening is that there is also considerable overlap with qualities of leadership identified by one of England's most respected school principals.

Sir David Carter is chief executive of the Cabot Learning Federation, a group of 11 schools based in and around Bristol. Many of the schools joined the federation after they were identified as in need of improvement, and Sir David was knighted earlier this year for services to education.

When I interviewed him last month for an [article](#) on superheads – principals skilled in turning around struggling schools – he spoke about the need to work relentlessly on behalf of pupils (3), having a clear and consistent vision (1) and working closely with the community the school serves (7).

He also adds other qualities, some perhaps implicit in the IoE list, but all crucial to the successful school leadership. Among these was the ability to balance strategic and operational roles, and the ability to manage change and understand how it works.

Another is talent spotting. Sir David invests a huge amount of time in making the right appointments and in getting people in the right roles.

Effective principals also need to have a high level of emotional intelligence and interpersonal skills. Often, the power of school leaders is vested in their capacity to persuade and influence, rather than to direct. "You have to take people with you, you can't be bullish," Sir David says. "You have got to build collaboration and get people to work together."

Finally, Sir David identifies a sense of moral purpose. While this may be of most significance in disadvantaged areas, the desire to get the best for all children is something every principal should possess. "I don't know many who don't have that," Sir David adds.

Of course, every school leader will have a different list. Many will echo these characteristics, many will emphasise different aspects and some will add their own characteristics. But this list – plus Sir David's additions – seems to offer a set of core qualities.

The next question – and one to which I hope to return in a future article – is whether it is reasonable to expect to find them all in one person, and whether the increasingly onerous requirements of the job are off-putting for people who are eminently suitable to lead our schools.